Report Summary
The High School Dropout Epidemic: Consequences, Causes, and Proposed Cures[1]

Introduction to the Report

This study of high school dropouts describes the size and consequences of the dropout problem, reports why students say that drop out, and proposes local, state, and federal policies to confront the dropout problem.

The 467 ethnically and racially diverse dropouts aged 16-25 who participated in the study were not a nationally representative sample. However, they were drawn from 25 locations with high dropout rates in large cities (67 percent), suburbs (14 percent), and rural areas (17 percent). The sample was 36 percent white, 36 percent African-American, and 27 percent Hispanic.

The data used in the study is self-reported data. That is, it was obtained through focus groups and a survey: primarily through structured, face-to-face interviews.[2]

Findings and Discussion

Size of the Dropout Problem

- Nationally, about one-third of all high school students fail to graduate with their class.
- For whites and Asian students, the graduation rate is about 75 percent; for minority students (African-American, Hispanic, Native American), the rate is about 50 percent.
- In 2003, there were 3.5 million Americans aged 16 to 25 who had not graduated from high school and who were not enrolled in school.
- Schools with low graduation rates are concentrated in southern and southwestern states.

Personal and Societal Consequences of the Dropout Problem

- On average, high school dropouts earn $9,200 less per year than high school graduates. Assuming a 45 years of employment, the personal income loss totals over $400,000.
- Dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, divorced, in prison, unhealthy, and single parents of children who will become dropouts. The cost to the nation for each student who drops out of high school is estimated to be about $2 million.

Who Drops Out?

Participants were asked why they chose to drop out of school.

- 88 percent had passing grades; 62 percent were making C's and above.
- 71 percent lost interest in school in the 9th and 10th grades.
- 58 percent dropped out with less than two years to complete high school.
- 70 percent were confident that they could have completed high school.
- 23 percent blamed the schools for their decision to drop out; however, 58 percent accept personal responsibility for the decision, and 26 percent shared the responsibility with the school.

Five Top Student-reported Reasons for Dropping Out

- School is boring (47 percent). Teachers make no attempt to connect school work to workforce skills. Teaching was uninspired and unmotivating, with teachers simply telling students what to do without engaging them in the lesson. Schools "shunt low-performing students to low-level classes with unchallenging work;" the low expectations and uninteresting work promote absenteeism.
- The toll of absenteeism (43 percent). Dropping out is a "gradual process of disengagement" and not a sudden act. Disinterest leads to absenteeism, and unchecked absenteeism feeds on itself. Students find it harder and harder to catch up, thus increasing the motivation to be absent. National data shows that absenteeism is "the most common indicator of overall student engagement and a significant predictor of dropping out." Among the study participants, about 60 percent reported frequent absenteeism in the year they dropped out; over one-third reported frequent absenteeism in the year before they dropped out.

- Hanging out with other disinterested students (42 percent). Being with friends – friends with like problems and attitudes – became preferable to being in school. School was just "forgotten."
- Too much freedom, and not enough rules (38 percent). In grades K-8, rules of attendance and discipline are enforced; in high school students suddenly are left to "do their own thing." To the aforementioned boredom of teaching by lecture, schools add lack of order (discipline and rules) and failure to make certain that students attend class. Fifty-seven percent said that their schools did not do enough to make students feel safe from violence.
- Failing in school work (35%). The majority of study participants (57percent) said high school graduation requirements were too difficult; they found it difficult to pass from one grade level to the next. Thirty percent could not keep up with the work; 43 percent had missed too many days of school to catch up. In fact, 32 percent were required to repeat a grade before they dropped out.

Proposals for Confronting the Dropout Problem

The report calls for "immediate, large-scale attention form policymakers, educators, the non-profit and business communities and the public" with the goal of "increasing the percentages of students who graduate from high school ready for college and the workforce." It suggests specific policy actions at three levels: schools and communities; state government; federal government. Some of the themes running through these three sets of policy pathways include:

- Providing better information to the public. Early in the report, the authors comment that "the public is almost entirely unaware of the severity of the problem due to inaccurate data – both the underestimation of dropout rates and the overestimation of graduation rates." [NOTE: The National Governors Association is working to get all states to agree on a single method for calculating graduation rates.] On a school level, parents often are unaware of the absenteeism of their children.
- Making stronger connections between school studies and workforce skills. This is a direct attack on the "school is boring" issue. Suggestions for improving real-world learning for potential dropouts include internships and service learning projects.
- Improving instruction and access to supports for struggling students. At an organizational level, this translates into different schools for different students and improved strategies for engaging parents. At the school level, it calls not only for access to tutoring, summer classes, and extra instructional time with teachers; but also it calls for ensuring that every student has at least one adult in the school to whom the student can turn with personal and academic problems.
- Reducing absenteeism. At present, many schools do not keep daily records of who attends and who doesn't. This is complicated by the fact that students may attend some classes during the day and skip others. Action is needed to ensure that all schools have a reliable record of student absentees, that they immediately notify parents/guardians, that they address the reasons that drove the students away.
- Reconsidering state compulsory school age laws. Every state has a law stating that a student may not choose to leave school before age 16, an age at which most students are in grade 10. However, while state laws place the age at which a student may choose to leave school at 16 to 18 years, many have "exemptions." There are 11 states in which the student may terminate school attendance as early as age 14 under one or more of several conditions: with parental consent; if gainfully employed; by presentation of a certificate of employment from the State Labor Bureau; if the student has completed grade 9; if the student has completed grade 8; if the student has completed grade 6; if the student is being home-schooled; if it is necessary for the student to work in order to support self or family; or if in farm or domestic service. There are 23 states that have compulsory school ages of 17 or 18, but 16 of those states have exemptions that permit school leaving at age 16 or below. The report recommends that states raise the compulsory school age to 18; the recommendation does not disallow the kinds of "exemptions" just noted.[3]

About the Publisher

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Caveat Emptor

This summary was prepared by Bob Kansky (robk@tribcsp.com). It's one of a series summaries offered to business, education, and policy leaders who are interested in the systemic improvement of mathematics and science education. The summary does not critique the report's assumptions, methods, or conclusions. It simply uses a somewhat standardized format to provide a brief introduction to the content of the report. Readers are encouraged to consult the original document for further information.

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[1]Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J. J. Jr., and Morison, K. B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts.* Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises, LLC. 43 pages. http://www.civicenterprises.net .

[2]NOTE: There is some danger in dealing with self-reported data – specifically, in inferring participants' actions from their statements of intended actions. A example of this problem appears on page 10 of the report where it is noted that "At the time of their decision to leave high school, 53 percent had planned to go back and graduate. Since that time, however, only 11 percent have actually gone back and graduated."

[3]This recommendation seems to be based more on hope than on data. Data on graduation rates (from page 1 of the report and from the DC website) and data on compulsory school attendance age (from pages 23 and 24 of the report) are summarized in the following table.

Graduation Rate Band	Number of States in this Graduation Rate Band	Compulsory School Age Number/(***Percent***) of States		
		16	17	18
90-100%	1[a]	1 (***100***)		
80-89%	6[b]	3 (***50***)	1 (***17***)	2 (***33***)
70-79%	27[c]	14 (***52***)	3 (***11***)	10(***37***)
60-69%	11[d]	3 (***27***)	3 (***27***)	5 (***45***)
< 60%	6[e]	3 (***50***)	2 (***33***)	1 (***17***)

[a]The state is MD.

[b]The states are IA, MN, NE, ND, PA, and WI.

[c]The states are AZ, AR, CO, CT, DE, ID, IL, IN, KS, ME, MA, MI, MO, MT, NH, NJ, OH, OK, OR, RI, SD, UT, VT, VA, WA, WV, and WY.

[d]The states are CA, DC, KY, LA, MA. MS, NV, MM, NY, NC, and TX.

[e]The states are AL, AK, FL, GA, SC, and TN.